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Wednesday, July 16, 2008

## County looking to help itself on transportation

Council looks for alternatives to state aid ways to pay for projects

by Sean R. Sedam | Staff Writer

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Montgomery County cannot wait for the state to help pay for its transportation needs, County Council members said this week as they finalized a letter outlining road and transit priorities for state aid.

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The county has 13 projects that are in the design or planning stage and is seeking \$825 million in order to build them over next six years. The state has already put \$42 million toward the projects, which include bridges and interchange improvements at major intersections and the widening of portions of Woodfield, Spencerville and Norbeck roads and Md. 28/198.

“All of these are extraordinarily expensive, just about every last one,” said Councilwoman Nancy M. Floreen, who chairs the council’s Transportation, Infrastructure, Energy and Environment Committee. “And all of these are extraordinarily important. Our major congestion is on state roads and the state dropped the ball.”

Such a lengthy wish list may be little more than wishful thinking given the state’s fiscal climate, said Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park.

“It’s somewhat academic now, we’re seeing a reduction in resources to fund transportation needs,” she said. “We need more money period.”

To that end, the county is “forward funding” several projects to keep them on schedule, using county money to pay for state roads with the hope the state recoups the costs later.

That includes spending \$22.4 million over three years to build a 1,200-space garage at the Glenmont Metro station, \$8.2 million to design and purchase right of way for the Georgia Avenue/Randolph Road interchange, with another \$6.1 million expected to be approved in the coming weeks. The county has already spent \$2.4 million toward designing the I-270/Watkins Mill Road interchange, which the letter lists as the county’s top road priority.

The Corridor Cities Transitway, a light rail or rapid bus line connecting the Shady Grove Metro station to Clarksburg, and the Purple Line, a proposed 16-mile light rail or bus line from Bethesda to New Carrollton, are the county’s top regional priorities.

The county’s other regional priorities, which depend on state and federal dollars and are largely out of the purview of county officials, include improvements to the roads and Metro station serving the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, which will be absorbing Walter Reed Army Medical Center as part of the military’s Base Realignment and Closure process.

The council approved the priorities letter to its delegation leaders in Annapolis on a 5-2 vote Tuesday. Council members Marc Elrich and Philip M. Andrews were opposed.

Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park wanted more of an emphasis on transit priorities. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg made a motion to move an interchange at Interstate 270 and Watkins Mill Road, the second part of the project, up to No. 2 on the priorities list, bumping the Rockville Pike/Montrose Road project’s second phase to No. 7. The motion failed.

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The county is looking for new ways to pay for projects in advance.

Later this summer, County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) plans to release revenue bonds that will pay for state transportation projects. The bonds will use liquor sales profits for funding of the initiative that the council passed two years ago.

Leggett has been reluctant to advance county money for state road projects, preferring to boost the state gasoline tax to pay for state roads.

A majority of the council supports a gas tax increase, an idea that did not win favor in the General Assembly this year. Without the tax option, advance funding is a way to keep county road projects on schedule, council members said.

“We want to do this in partnership,” said Council President Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown. “We’re not trying to usurp anybody. We just can’t wait.”

With declining revenues from the state’s gas, vehicle titling and sales taxes, which are dedicated at least in part to transportation, the county and its delegation in Annapolis need to strategize on how to get the most out state dollars, said Del. Brian J. Feldman, who heads the county delegation in the House of Delegates.

“The environment’s going to be very challenging,” said Feldman (D-Dist. 15) of Potomac. “It may require tactically as a county that we maybe look at lower ticket items and maybe bump them up the list.”

The state is looking for its own ways to hold down transportation costs while providing cleaner, more fuel-efficient modes of transit.

Gov. Martin O’Malley (D) announced Tuesday in Baltimore that all new Maryland Transit Administration bus purchases will be of hybrid-electric buses in an effort to convert the entire fleet to hybrids by 2014. The MTA buses serve the Baltimore region.

Montgomery County has 14 hybrid-electric buses in its 375-bus Ride On fleet and is budgeted to buy 39 more this fiscal year. Ninety-five Ride On buses run on compressed natural gas.

#### Road projects

These projects are in the design or planning state and will be ready for construction during the next six years. The County Council ranked them in order of priority:

Interstate 270/Watkins Mill Road Extended: Build bridge over I-270\*

Rockville Pike/Montrose Parkway (phase 2): segment from Chapman Avenue to Parklawn Drive, including new bridge over CSX tracks — \$53 million

Woodfield Road: widen to six lanes between Midcounty Highway and Snouffer School Road #

Georgia Avenue: build a two-lane bypass around Brookeville — \$21 million

Georgia Avenue/Norbeck Road: build a grade-separated interchange — \$91 million

Clopper Road: improve intersections from I-270 to Seneca Creek State Park — \$41 million

I-270/Watkins Mill Extended: complete interchange\*

Spencerville Road: widen to four lanes from Old Columbia Pike to U.S. 29 — \$30 million

Norbeck Road: widen to four lanes from Georgia Avenue to Layhill Road — \$95 million

I-210/Newcut Road: build grade separated interchange — \$88 million

Woodfield Road: widen to six lanes from Snouffer School Road to Airpark Road and from Fieldcrest Road to Warfield Road #

U.S. 29/Fairland Road/Musgrove Road: build grade-separated interchange — \$68 million

Md. 28/198: widen to four lanes from Layhill Road to Old Columbia Pike — \$135 million



\*Total cost of No. 1 and No. 7 is \$140 million.

#Total cost of No. 3 and No. 11 is \$63 million.